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ABSTRACT

ALTHOUGH KNOWLEDGE OF FORM, STRUCTURE, AND HISTORICAL PERIODS ENRICH THE STUDY OF LITERATURE, THE ENGLISH TEACHER MUST ALWAYS KEEP IN MIND THAT THE ESSENCE OF ANY GREAT WORK LIES IN ITS COMMUNICATION OF "PEAKS" OF EXPERIENCE, AND THAT THE AUTHOR'S HUMAN INSIGHTS SHOULD BE TRANSMITTED TO STUDENTS. SOME PRINCIPLES CAN AID THE TEACHER IN ACHIEVING THE MAJOR UNDERSTANDING ABOUT LITERATURE WITH STUDENTS. FIRST, HE SHOULD SELECT READING MATERIALS BY DETERMINING WHAT KINDS OF EXPERIENCES HE WANTS HIS STUDENTS TO UNDERGO AND WHAT PARTICULAR WORKS WILL BE RELEVANT TO THEM. OTHER PRINCIPLES ARE READING ALoud TO STUDENTS, HELPING THEM SUMMON UP PERSONAL EXPERIENCES THAT RELATE TO THE STORY OR CHARACTERS, ENCOURAGING FRANK DISCUSSION ABOUT THEIR REACTIONS TO THE WORK, AND ALLOWING THEM MANY OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPRESS IN WRITING THEIR OWN SEARCHES AND DISCOVERIES. (MF)

LITERATURE AND LIFE have the power to evoke what Carlsen calls "peak experiences." If the reader is not caught up in these through his feelings and emotions, he will miss the connotative power of literature. If the student is not allowed to record them, his awareness of life will be dulled. There is more to literature and to writing, he says, than mere fact and exposition.

Literature: Dead or Alive?

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Not long ago I went to see *Zorba, the Greek* and once again I experienced that strange sensation which comes to me only from a work of art. I was swept up in the lives and feelings of imaginary people that became more real to me than people I meet daily. I entered for a brief time into their experiences, so selected and arranged as to bring out a certain concept about human living. For days afterwards I could not come completely back to my own immediate world, for I was haunted by these people and what they seemed to represent. As a result I was strangely rearranging my own perceptions about my own experiences and my own value system.

This process has happened to me over and over. It happened with the *Irish Twins* when I was six, with Zane Gray's novels when I was thirteen, with *The Haunted Bookstore* when I was sixteen and with *Look Homeward Angel* when I was twenty. Because of the importance of this interaction between art and my own life, I ultimately became a literature teacher. I wanted to help other people to the same kinds of insights.

In the teaching of English, I think it is time that we got back to admitting what literature does to us and why we cherish it. For the past twenty years or so, we have been trying to outdo the scientist in being clinically objective in our approach to literature—insisting that we discuss with students those aspects that are outwardly and objectively describable: the form, the structure, the organization and classification of the parts. Though we insist that these are but a means to an end, in many classrooms that I have visited, they become the end of literature study.

For a number of years I have asked students in my methods course to tell me what happens inside their minds as they read *The Ambitious Guest*. They say they feel the coldness of the night, the snugness of the cottage in the gap, the warmth of the interaction between the members of the family, the terrible restlessness of the young traveller. Most of all they are haunted by the tremendous irony: the people were killed because they were trying to save themselves and those who were not concerned with being remembered were, while the young man who so desperately wanted to be remembered was forgotten completely.

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Next I ask these same people to discuss what they would do if they were teaching the story to a class of 9th or 10th graders. Inevitably they by-pass completely the sequence of sensations which the story has aroused in them. Usually they indicate that they would discuss Hawthorne's life, the nature of puritanism, the structure of the story and the operation of symbols in it.

Fascinating as the structure of a work of literature may be, I always feel that it is a means to an end and not the reason for the work. Ferreting out the details of technique seems to me a kind of intellectual pursuit about at the level of working double crostics. The center of a work of art is some sort of communication. The painter, the writer, the musician, the dancer, the sculptor has been deeply aware of some aspect of human experiencing and he has attempted to communicate his vision to me. But what the artist communicates and how he communicates are fundamentally different from the usual expository communications of our business and social lives.

For most of us life goes along on a relatively even keel. We are stimulated; we make appropriate reactions. But every once in a while, we are stimulated and we react with a heightened and peculiar intensity. A young man walks out of a school building about five o'clock on a late May evening. As he walks south, he suddenly catches a glimpse between two battered old houses of the evening sun glinting on a river in the valley below. A sequence of sensations takes on heightened importance . . . the fatigue at the end of a day, a spring evening, old and decaying buildings, a flash of light on a river. Things focus. He cannot explain what is significant about this combination, but he realizes that it is. All of these elements have some mysterious symbolic relationship and something to do with the course of human life. He feels that he must communicate this experience to someone else. He must find some way of recording it, of holding its importance.

There is a too-loud voice going on and on behind me in an airplane. The voice sounds as if it belongs to a slightly over-weight, middle-aged salesman. He is telling his seat mate (and all of us in that part of the plane) about how widely traveled he is. He is being condescending, without really knowing it, about the Middle West where he had just boarded the plane. "You know, they have a really decent little hotel. I got a steak that was every bit as good as you can get in New York. No sir, I wouldn't mind living here a bit." For me there is a reaction of annoyance, but also a moment of peculiar awareness of the dreadful necessity of people to be somebody. It is so necessary that one must even establish one's superiority to utter strangers accidentally thrown together in adjoining plane seats.

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Wordsworth talks about those moments when "the burthen of the mystery is lightened and we see into the light of things." Recently one psychologist has used the term "peak experience." We all recognize that they exist in our own lives and we all recognize that they are perhaps the most important moments of living. In some ways these are the moments that are the realest that we know.

The art forms are the inventions of man to attempt to communicate these peak moments to others. He does not communicate through descriptions or exposition, but rather through evocation. Thus the writer uses language with full consciousness not only of its lexical meaning but also of its other qualities as well. He uses it with full awareness of the connotative power of words to carry a cluster of associated ideas. Thus *Mary* is not just the name of a girl, but it connotes simplicity, old fashionedness, purity, perhaps even some religious overtones. In addition, the writer is deeply aware of the sound quality of words and how through cultural inheritance certain sounds have become associated with certain feelings. "My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here," has a gay rhythmic quality which is in direct contrast to the pathos in the words' meaning. Thus a kind of pleasant nostalgic quality is created through the combination of sound and meaning. Browning's "The brown ploughed land" has in its sound something of the bleakness of the spring field. Mainly the literary artist depends on the ability of language to create images, on the metaphoric nature of language which allows him to bring together in the mind the qualities of disparate elements that mixed together create a new sensation. Thus in MacNeice's "The sunlight in the garden/Hardens and grows cold," the qualities of sunlight and of hardening are combined to produce a kind of shiver that suggests how daylight chills into night, how summer chills into winter, how youth chills into old age.

So I cannot escape the conclusion that literature is the attempt of a sensitive person to evoke in other people those moments of significance which he himself has undergone. And the teaching of literature has a fairly simple objective: to help young people undergo the experiences considered significant by the most sensitive people that the world has produced.

What a student learns about the social period in which the work was produced is completely secondary and peripheral. What he learns about the writer and his life is secondary. Even what he may deduce about the structure that produced the sensation is of secondary importance. The connections a student sees between this particular work and others that have come before it is also not of central importance. All of these may

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be interesting enough, but they have little worth if the central communication does not take place.

In teaching I have discovered only a handful of principles that seem to help in achieving the major understanding about literature with students. These are not new nor are they startling. They have, however, been minimized in recent years:

1. *The selection of the right work to present to students.* We should realize in selecting a piece of literature that it is not a work as such but rather a kind of peak experiencing that we wish students to undergo. So we have to ask: "What kinds of experience are these students ready to undergo?" The answer will be found in the kinds of lives and problems which they are facing.

The following are a handful of quotations taken from adolescent's journals. In these semi-unguarded revelations, they tell of the confusion, doubt and uncertainties of the young person:

Went to Sunday school class. I don't think I believe in God anymore, but I like the way that teacher puts things and gets us to talk. I ought to go more often.

Bill took me out to his house after dinner, but his mother was home. Worse luck.

If I'm pregnant, I'll go through with it. I'm willing to give in this much to life, but no more.

Wonderful day . . . found a wonderful new word . . . *puddle-wonderful*. That's just how I feel about spring.

God, I hate the way everyone looks at me at the swim meets. Just because I'm big, they all seem to feel sorry for the other guys swimming against me. It makes me feel I just have to win to show them.

Mom didn't say anything about the cigarettes she found in my room. I wonder if she's going to.

Adolescence is a period when things must be immediate. The literature that talks to them is that which is immediate. For the most part this will be post-World War II literature. Writers in each generation are primarily interested in finding integrations of the period in which they live. Since the adolescent still has not arrived at the long historical view of humanity, he finds he connects best with the literature of his own period. It is interesting that when teachers have used even very difficult contemporary writers, they have found that the problems of individual differences are minimized. *Death of a Salesman*, for example, has for a number of years been the single most significant work that we taught to Juniors. Teachers working with Upward Bound projects have reported that such students coming from deprived backgrounds have little difficulty in reading Sartre, Camus, or Updyke. In fact they have fewer problems with the selections than do their teachers.

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For younger adolescents the literature that means the most is the adolescent novel. Seventh graders can understand something about the nature of alienation in Esther Weir's *The Loner*. Ninth graders know what *Jamie* by Jack Bennett is all about. The most exciting reading experience possible for 10th graders is John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*. Boys find the Felsen car stories say much about their own needs to excel in something and girls feel Jeanette Eyerley deals directly with the confusions they themselves are experiencing. No, literature is not a psychiatrist's couch, but it must have a relationship with the reader's life or it means nothing. And for the adolescent reader, these are the books that that do just that.

2. *Reading aloud to students.* When I was in school, teachers at all levels read aloud to us a great deal. I can still remember a graduate professor with tears streaming down his cheeks as he read *He Who Gets Slapped* to a class. Then about twenty years ago we began to feel that students should be doing the reading themselves and the class period should be used for dropping pearls of wisdom about the reading. So we all but stopped oral reading. When I have asked people to recall moments in a literature class of unusual excitement and significance, they almost always recall a moment when a teacher had been reading to the class. Over and over a student says, "I can still hear the sound of Mr. ———'s voice as he read such and such a paragraph."

So we have experimented with oral reading of literature at University High School. And we find that this is one of the simple, old and usually effective avenues to literary awareness. It is really the literature itself that should talk to students. The teacher's interpretation of a work usually gets between the student and the selection. Oral reading is one of the ways to let the writer speak for himself.

3. *Reminding students of their own experiences related to those with which the writer is dealing.* Students simply do not automatically summon up their own experiences in reading. When they are helped with the process something important starts to happen. I suppose that the favorite book I teach to seventeen and eighteen year olds is *Of Human Bondage*. And the most exciting part of the teaching comes when we talk about the fact that every human being has a club foot that affects his life the way Philip's affect his. The club foot may be a too-large nose, the wrong color hair, too-short neck, spindly legs, shortness in height or what have you. One boy this year has been denying both in class and out that he has a club foot. But the very fact that he keeps referring to it six months after reading the book is indicative that something happened that he can't quite shake off. In dealing with as remote a symbol as *Metamorphosis*, the students were helped to understand Gregor's reaction

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to his transformation by being reminded of what it is like to wake up sick. They too refuse to accept . . . they too feel it will go away if they just wait a bit. There is a similar slow acceptance of a physical injury until the injury becomes a part of one.

4. *Talking frankly about the experience of a piece of literature.* Yes, this is the emotive approach to teaching that is out of fashion in today's world of the scientific and impersonal. But no one should be coldly impersonal about art. Some of the most exciting moments I remember in literature classes came when an instructor shared with us his own deep enjoyment of a work. So it is effective to say simply: "Isn't this an exciting and interesting idea? Don't you like the combination of words and ideas here? Did you notice the neatness of the construction? Doesn't it give you a kind of pleasure to discover that there is this pattern? These are lines that are worth memorizing because they roll off the tongue so smoothly."

5. *Giving students many opportunities to try to express their own peak experiences in writing.* Helen White said at a meeting several years ago that when she was a student, all English majors were trying to write. What they wrote wasn't very good, but at least they tried. Through the process they came to a new respect for the great achievement of those who could write. In recent years, teachers at the secondary level have been bombarded with injunctions to teach expository writing and expository writing alone. In the process they have thrown out the kind of self-discovery about literature and the literary act that comes only when one struggles with expression oneself. My own class at the moment has become deeply conscious of clichés through their own writing. They find that they automatically fall into clichés when they try to evoke their own experiences. They have discovered how difficult it is to get the subtle nuances in life down on paper. They find that professional writers are better than they ever realized.

In conclusion, here are two quotations from people remembering their own experiences in English classes. The first young man writes: "English teachers who insisted on the memorization of parts of *The Ancient Mariner* or who were concerned that I get the meaning of Shakespeare and Addison began to bore and irritate me to the point that I almost came to believe that the great works of literature were creations devised by authors for the sole purpose of torturing young students. Most of the fun and sense of wonder from reading deserted me." The second writes: "My English class was a place in which every day there was something exciting and interesting to discuss. Literature came alive because it was related to my own life."

Which kind of literature teacher are you?